Major occupational groups were accorded a certain traditional gradation. Scholars came first, as might be expected in an order whose theory it was that society should be controlled by those educated in the lore and the virtues of civilized humanity. Teachers were regarded as one of the five objects of worship—the others being Heaven, Earth, the Emperor, and parents. In ancient times the soldier and the scholar were ranked together under the same term. Next came the farmers, for they produced the food upon which mankind depended for sustenance. Third were the artisans, for they also were producers. Merchants were classified as fourth, for they made their profits by exchanging the fruits of other men's toil. Officials belonged to the scholar class and often felt it beneath them to intermarry with families engaged in trade.

The population which lived in boats on the south coast, actors, prostitutes, eunuchs, the underlings or "runners" in official yamens, and slaves were held to be markedly inferior socially.

Slavery seems never to have been so extensive or prominent as in the Roman Empire. At least on the eve of the changes brought by the Occident it was almost entirely domestic. Few if any great estates were cultivated by non-free labor. Slaves were used, if at all, chiefly in household service. Moreover, slavery was not associated with a racial distinction, as in the case of the American Negro. Most of the slaves seem to have been individuals of Chinese stock who through some misfortune, usually economic, had fallen to that status. The poor, for example, might sell their daughters, especially in time of famine.

Household slaves were predominantly women and girls. It was because girls were regarded less highly than boys that they were the members the family sold first. They led a hard life, but public opinion generally acted as a restraint on excessive cruelty. Slave girls might be taken as concubines, or, more frequently, be married off to poorer men of the neighborhood.

Beggars have been a fairly numerous and well recognized portion of the community. As a rule their plight has been miserable. People have been driven into mendicancy by a variety of causes. In the case of many, illness or an accident has incapacitated the sufferers for ordinary employment and in default of friends or family who could give financial support the beggar's life has